

Feature Stories: What News Watchers Don't Know They're Missing

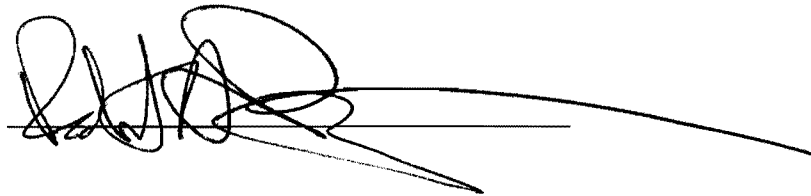
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Bob Papper', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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Abstract

For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to be a television news reporter. I love meeting new people and seeing interesting things every day. However, the majority of newscasts today are filled with stories about distressing crimes, deadly fires, and devastating car accidents. Those are interspersed with less-than-exciting updates on legislative meetings, court hearings, and executive seminars.

News directors seem to insist these are the reports viewers want to watch, but I believe positive stories about fascinating people and places can hold a viewer's attention just as well. I also think untraditional feature stories stir more emotions in the people watching at home.

My college experience consisted of internships with news departments in Indianapolis and Fort Wayne. I also participated in a news immersion program at Ball State's NewsLink Indiana. I gained much hands-on experience and knowledge in all three settings, but I particularly enjoyed creating news packages every day at NewsLink Indiana. NewsLink management allowed us to try unconventional ideas. I was able to produce many stories featuring local people, which I greatly enjoyed. At the internships, I also tried to create news packages that featured individuals.

My thesis project is a collection of many of those feature stories. Often such stories require more time and creativity, but I believe they are more entertaining for the audience. I enjoy working on feature stories because they are more fun and interesting for me as a reporter. Reporters are supposed to be eyes and ears for the community, and many of these exciting stories are normally overlooked. Newsrooms are too concerned about reporting what they think they're "supposed to," but much of that is boring or depressing. Perhaps a larger audience would watch the news if there were more upbeat stories.

My project gives an overview of my college work, which included days of searching, questioning, and writing, all in an effort to be a good storyteller. The video includes some of my favorite stories, and introduces the viewer to some of the people I've been privileged to meet. This project is my way of capturing the art of telling feature stories. My writings help the audience understand what was involved in creating each story. My personal critiques also help me see what I don't like about the finished pieces, so I can try to improve my future stories. I hope the video will engage, enlighten, and entertain the audience, and I hope the stories will be ones people watch closely, talk about, and remember.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Mr. Bob Papper for being my advisor on this project. He is an extremely busy man and I appreciated him taking time out of his schedule for my visits to his office and my many emails. He also was an excellent professor who taught me how to write news clearly and concisely. His critiques have helped my packages improve.

I would also like to give thanks to the wonderful photographers, who shot the feature stories on my tape. They include Stacy (who made each day fun), Sarah (who is an awesome shooter), Kevin, Chris, Brian, Derek, and Lee. These fine people all made great teammates. I enjoyed working with them at NewsLink Indiana. Without their help, the packages would not have been as good.

Thanks also to the Ball State professors and the management at NewsLink Indiana who helped with ideas, guided me through frustrating times, and sharpened my storytelling skills. Terry, Tim, Wright, and Chris really prepared me for my reporting career. I learned so much from them all.

Thanks too to the students in my immersion group. We worked together, and learned so much as a group. Our group included Alex Santos, who recently lost a fight to brain and spinal cancer. He worked with me on several packages, and helped set up the Glassmaker story and our first story at Dougherty Orchards. I learned a lot about life from Alex in the three and a half years I knew him.

Thanks also to everyone I met and learned tips from at both of my internships, including Anne Marie Tiernon, who took me under her wing during my internship at Channel 13.

Finally, I want to thank my mom and dad for encouraging me to pursue my dream, supporting me through college, and motivating me to never give up.

The Glassmaker

The first story of my project is my personal favorite. Jeff Ball is a glassmaker in Elwood, Indiana. I met him after talking to the mayor of Elwood, who showed a group of us NewsLink students the city building's chandelier, made by Ball. Ball owns Prestige Glass, which hand-makes glass paperweights and lamps.

We spent a day with Ball. He showed us the process of making his art pieces and the fabulous finished products. I really enjoyed this story because not only was his work fascinating, but Ball was a wonderfully happy person. He truly loved his job. As he said in the closing line of the story, "I hope I get to do it till the day I die."

I think the story turned out really well. The photographer got lots of great shots. Stories like this are ideal for TV because the images are eye-catching. Also, Ball had very personal comments, which I like to use because they help the audience get to know the person, and help bring out emotions.

While I am glad I talked to Ball's employee and his wife, who works in their store, I think talking to a customer who cherishes their glass keepsake would have added another dimension to the story.

Overall, I was happy with how the story turned out. The story is beneficial to the audience because they learned something about how glass paperweights are made. They also learned about a great person in their community. They got a great idea for a future gift. They also hopefully got a good feeling after watching the story. For me, this story "puts a happy place in my heart," much like Ball's work does for him.

Apple Orchard

The apple orchard story wasn't my first visit to Dougherty Orchards in Cambridge City. In fact, we had done a story on their corn maze about a year before. Word had it that the Dougherty parents died, but their children were keeping up the business. I called them and asked if I could come out and talk to them. They agreed. They were a very unique family with tight bonds.

In this story, I tried to keep the twist to the story until the end, which I hope worked out okay. I focused first on the good apple season, and the praise they get from customers. Then I revealed how the kids were now taking over through the heartache of their parents' deaths. The tears of the younger sister show how much the family has been through, but I think the story is still positive. It shows their success because of their hard work and love for each other.

In this story, I did talk to both the owners and the customers, which makes it well-rounded. I like the alliteration I used with "barrels to the brim" and "labor, learning, and love." If I were to do it again, I would contrast the good weather conditions to the tumultuous emotions they've faced this year, as a better way to connect the crop with the family.

I was pleased with this story, and I think it is one an audience can relate to...because orchards are familiar to Hoosiers, and families are at the core of their lives. The Doughertys expressed and demonstrated values that motivate me to find the strength to work through life's struggles. Hopefully they'll leave the same impression on those who watch.

Ball of Paint

The paintball story was one of those stories I wanted to do for some time before I actually did it. When I finally did, I was more fascinated that I thought I was going to be. Tim Underhill, a NewsLink manager, had told us about a giant ball of paint in tiny Alexandria. I wanted to see it.

Mike Carmichael was a one-of-a-kind person. It was really unbelievable how much time, effort, and money he has put into what started out as a baseball dipped in paint. It's now the center of life for he and his wife. It's also amazing that people travel so far just to see the ball and add a layer of paint. But I must admit I was excited that I got to be a part of the ball's history. The ball is pretty famous after all, with recognition from Ripley's, Guinness, and Tom Green.

I was happy with the story, especially because I made a concerted effort to write to the video. In other words, the pictures show what I'm saying. I should have talked to someone who visited though. I also don't like in my standup when I stop painting as I talk. It looks like I can't do two things at once. Otherwise, I'm happy with the writing and the video.

This story was one that let the audience see something intriguing and unique. It may have given them an idea of something to see not far from home. I think it's one of those stories people can enjoy watching and will remember. It's okay if they think the idea of keeping a giant ball of paint for 30 years and recording the color of more than 18,000 layers is crazy; that's what makes the story intriguing and entertaining.

Mural with a Moral

I really love the opening to this story: “She’s a storyteller. But instead of using her lips, Katie Yamasaki uses brush tips.” I still remember coming up with that on the ride home, and I think it works well.

I think the story is interesting because you get to hear the meaning of the mural from the artist. I think people like to know the intended interpretation of artwork. This story also tells the history of Japanese Americans, and is personalized by Katie’s family account.

I don’t like how the sound bite from the other student seems to overlap Katie talking. The lighting also is bad on that student’s interview, which detracts from her words.

Overall, I like the story. I think it turned out well, especially for the short amount of time we had to put this one together. The audience gets to know Katie, gets to see her beautiful work of art, and gets a quick history lesson.

Pumpkin Patch

“A patch of pint-sized pumpkin pickers.” There’s that alliteration again. I like how I seem to sum up what I’m talking about in my first line. It helps set the tone. It’s like it’s own headline, which is why I feel it doesn’t need to be a complete sentence.

This story is another example of trying to do something different in the standup. However, my head is cut off, so I don’t know if it works. I like how the end of my stand-up leads right into the sound from the kids saying, “a big one.”

The children might be hard to hear, but they are so cute! This story lends itself to lots of good video. I like this story, and it really brightened my day when we shot it. Earlier, two other potential stories I had fell through after the people yelled at me on the phone because they were upset with something that wasn’t my fault. After I cried, I tried this story as a last resort, and it worked out well.

I think the story is cute, and it flows well from the voice track to the sound bites. The audience is entertained by watching the kids. They can also learn how to pick a good pumpkin. Also, the story shows a fun activity for families that is timely for the season.

Professional Shoplifters

This story idea came from a press release from the Anderson Police Department. I begin with my usual alliteration, “Shopping season’s in full swing.” “Leaving these doors” refers to the picture in the video, which is good.

There are a couple of things I don’t like right off the bat, however. I think the first soundbite is slow and not very captivating. I don’t like how the second soundbite is in the same location—it looks like a jump cut. We never got video of the elite shoplifting expert working because he said he didn’t have time. I should have persisted.

I also should have done my standup differently. I look really awkward with the jeans in my coat. It almost looks like I am pregnant. However, I think the second half works great. I like how it is shot from the trunk of the car with the jeans in the foreground, and then I shut the trunk. I think it is a creative standup, and the photographer did a good job.

This story was difficult because it was hard to get video. It was a rainy day and we didn’t have rain gear for the camera. We weren’t allowed to get video inside the mall, so we had to find file video. It would have been nice to talk to shoppers, but we just couldn’t get any with our timing. Also, the graphic of the mugshots stays up for a long time, which I don’t like. It was hard to find video that we could use that doesn’t seem to incriminate any of the shoppers as potential shoplifters.

However, I chose to put this story on the tape to show how I was able to put together a story out of basically nothing. I tried to be creative with the standup, and I tried to feature the police expert. You get to know someone who works for the community, and has a pretty interesting profession.

The Other Side of Christmas

I think this story idea was one of the many that comes from Tim Underhill in the NewsLink newsroom. But it's something that's interesting. Decorations that are seen all over the world are made right here. Right off the bat I tried to get the audience involved by addressing them. It also gets their attention because they don't think about who makes the decorations they see every day. They get a "behind the scenes" look with this story, which makes them feel special to see inside.

I like my writing in this story because I name the snowflakes, wreaths, and trees...as well as what the workers do: string lights, paint parts, and make garland. All the video matches what I'm saying! This was a good example of great teamwork with the photographer. Also, the story flows well. I go from one soundbite about how the decorations last forever into the voice track where I say "Christmas excitement doesn't last quite as long here," and then into other soundbites that refer to that idea. It all bounces back and forth like a conversation.

Processes like making decorations are very visual, which is great for television. I think my audience will enjoy watching this story.

I also like how I talked to the employees. It was funny to hear the employees say they get tired of Christmas. It shows viewers a side of Christmas they don't usually see. It features a local business which can help build pride within a community. It also is a story the viewer might talk about later. The standup was ok. We tried to show something, and have a unique camera angle. Does it look good? I'm not sure.

Free Calling

I think I've discovered my signature. I always start my packages in the same way—with alliteration. This story was a good example of finding a character and making this story feature that person rather than just tell the facts and information.

What do I think about the central character I used? I liked her. She was willing to talk and let us in her home. She was also the only one to use the service at her place of residence. She was also very nice. She gave me an angel she made as we left. But I wonder what the viewer at home thinks about her. Her teeth look really bad and I think she's hard to take seriously because of that. The viewer might even have a hard time listening to her because they are concentrating on her appearance. I hope that's not the case. Also, the lighting is bad in her interview, which doesn't help.

My standup was okay. I tried to show something. But it looks a little staged or unnatural.

The other interview I used doesn't flow well, and it looks like we're looking at the back of the lady's head. But I'm glad I did use the senior citizens who are impacted by this service. It makes it so much more personal than just talking to the community foundation. I'm also glad I found a certain one to focus on—she's the story because the viewer gets to know her and see what the free calls really mean to her.

The story can make you feel good to see what the organization is doing for seniors, who often get ignored. The story also has a little lesson—something simple can make someone happy. I think that's important to remember in life. This is a nice upbeat story to put on the news. It's local, it's timely, and it's a nice story.

Utility Frustrations

This story could have easily just been a traditional story telling the facts, but we found someone who let us in their home to tell their story. All we had to do was ask. I really like it because they were so emotional. You can see their fear and frustration. I think it was important that I talked to the official, but the personal story allows the family to become the characters. The viewer gets to know them, and understand why the situation is a problem. This situation affects real people of all ages, and it was happening at Christmas, a time when people are generally more giving.

I like how I said the problems mount at hilltop. I wrote that purposely. The standup shows where the bills are paid. People in line shows that other people are paying their bills. I like that I'm standing amongst real people. It shows that I'm there, and I included facts in what I was saying there too.

If I could change anything about the story I would have gotten video of the family walking about and interacting in their home, instead of just having video of them sitting on the couch. It also would have been more fair to include the apartment owner's side of the story. They wouldn't talk to us, but maybe I should have at least mentioned that.

I think I told a good story, it is emotional and controversial, it affects a large number of people, and perhaps this story motivated the apartment complex to take action. This was a way to help the residents.

The James Dean Museum

This story features a popular spot in Fairmount that is really unique. I think it is fascinating how obsessed this small town is with a star of just three movies. People come from all over the country to see this gallery and to attend the town's annual festival. I should have started the story with that, instead of with the book. I don't think the book gets the attention of the audience as well.

I like how I reveal the house in the standup. The thing I like the least about the story is my voice. I was sick, and that's all I notice the whole time because it sounds really bad. Also, while I like talking to real people, Ray Eurich looks a bit scary. I think you see Loehr too much in the story as well. Some of the shots look kind of weird. But this was one of my very first feature stories at NewsLink, so we were just getting the hang of things. I really learned a lot from doing this story. It was really fun, and I learned a lot about James Dean, and about telling a story.

Dog Training

Dogs make good citizen too. That's what I learned from this story. I made it a feature story by focusing on one particular dog at the class that day—Silas. I introduced him and the viewer heard from the owner about the dog. Then, I explained more about what the classes are. However, I think I should have came back to Silas. After the introduction to the package, we kind of forget about Silas. I think the story would have come full circle if I mentioned him again, at least at the end.

The story is good because it has good video. People like watching animals. I like it when I list the tasks the dogs perform and the video matches. The standup is good because I do something. But I think it may have been better if I talked while I gave the dog a high-five.

This story was shot quickly. But I still think it works because it is informative to the audience and interesting and has a positive tone.

In the Classroom

I think feature stories can come from anywhere. You might have to look a little harder to find them, because they don't come to the newsroom in the form of a press release. I found this story because Tricia was my roommate. I thought the program was really neat, and thought it would make a good story. We had to drive to Indianapolis to shoot it.

I don't like how I used Tricia's name in the opening line. People don't know her, so I should have introduced them to her rather than talk about her like she's someone they should know. It is also difficult to hear the little girl reading her paper to Tricia. Tricia's interview looks bad because of the lighting and background. I should have talked to her in a less formal setting. Perhaps I could have put a microphone on her in the classroom and just talked to her casually. I also shouldn't have shown her every time she talked in the story. I could have put better video over top of her talking.

I do like how I listed her duties and interspersed it with natural sound from the classroom. Natural sound is great! I tried to use it a lot in this story and it sounds good. It really makes the audience feel like they are there.

This is a good story that shows a good education program. It's good for the college students, the teachers, and the elementary students. Education is very important to people. I also think kids make good video.

Geraldine's Stent

I did this story at my internship at Channel 13. I helped the health reporter, Anne Marie Tiernon, on a regular basis. When it came time to shoot this interview, she had another appointment and couldn't make it. So she let me go and do the interviews. Stories like this have to be set up with the personal relations person at the hospital. They let us know about this new stent, and so we arranged to find a patient who would be willing to talk to us about their experience with it.

Geraldine made a good character. The first line of the story is quick and attention-grabbing. Then I introduced Geraldine. I think this story does a good job of explaining what the stent is for, and how the process works. I think it answers major questions about this new device. I like the computer generated video. I think it looks high-tech and is interesting to the viewer...and I still tried to match my words to the video. I did this when talking about the umbrella device capturing debris (except I don't like how I said the word "debris").

We need to watch the microphone cords, because the cord is very visible on Geraldine.

I tried something different by having the standup at the end. I was doing something weird with my arms, which looks awkward.

This story was a good story to personalize. It allows the audience to see real benefits of the carotid stent. You care about Geraldine—she's a sweet lady you don't want to have a stroke. In addition, many people worry about their own family members. This story tells them what they can do. It might help solve a serious health problem. This story is helpful because it's informative and it leaves you happy because of the progress of the medical field and the good results it had for this individual.

Finest Fieldhouse for Fans

This feature story is about a place, as opposed to a person. But in a way, it also features everyone at New Castle Chrysler High School. I got this story idea from my roommate's little brother, who is from New Castle. He told me the fieldhouse just won the title from USA Today. Such an honor doesn't happen very often...and it was right here! I think that's pretty special for our community. Anything in the Midwest getting national acclaim is interesting.

The fieldhouse is something viewers can go see, and this is definitely a story to talk about at school or work. And it is entertaining as well. The video works for the story. You get to see the fieldhouse. But it would have been awesome to have been there for a game, with the bleachers packed with screaming fans and lots of action on the floor. But with our time constraints, that wasn't possible. I was just glad we were able to talk to so many people. We talked to adults and students, which was good. I wish we would have gotten a wider shot of the mascot so you can see what he's wearing and can tell that he's the mascot.

Overall, this is a good story, in my opinion. It tells a story and gives a history of the fieldhouse. It was also timely because of the recent award they received.